Repertoire Activities

The Orchestra Swings with Form

**Aim:** How does form help musicians swing?

**Summary:** Students establish an understanding of form and explore A-A-B-A form in “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” and 12-bar blues form in “Duke’s Place.”

**Materials:** Link Up Digital Media

**Standards:** National 2, 4, 7, 10; NYC 1, 2, 3

**Vocabulary:** blues, bridge, chord, chorus, form, harmonic changes, measure, scale

Musical Form

In music, form is the road map for any piece, providing the overall layout or structure and defining how one section connects to the next. The form helps the musicians stay together and know where they are in the music. Some musical forms are specific to certain styles or periods of music; other forms span many styles and eras. In jazz, as the form repeats and the rhythm section maintains the beat, the other musicians can play the melody and have the chance to play improvised solos.

- What are some examples of how form is used in your life (e.g., following a recipe, map, or schedule)?

Exploring A-A-B-A Form in “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”

A-A-B-A form is a common form used in many styles of music. In many songs and jazz tunes, each of the four sections has eight measures, adding up to 32 measures of music. The A sections are the same or slightly different, and the B section (often referred to as the bridge) is contrasting.

- Learn the melody for “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” on SG10.
- As you sing, use the Melodic and Lyric Patterns chart on page 39 to follow the form.
  - Note when the melody repeats and when the melodic pattern is different.
  - Note similarities and differences in the lyrics for each line.

Taking a Chorus

In jazz, the A-A-B-A form is repeated multiple times; one time through the full form is called a chorus. When a jazz musician “takes a chorus,” it means that she or he improvises a solo over the form of the piece. For example, when you and your students have sung through the entire basic part of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” you have taken a chorus. In the final concert, we will hear and perform this chorus several times.

Play Track 24 “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (Washburne). You will hear the singer take a full chorus at the beginning, followed by the piano, saxophone, trumpet, and drums each taking a half chorus (the A-A or B-A sections, respectively). To end the song, the singer takes it from the second half of the chorus and “tags” (or “takes us out”) by singing the “doo wah” lyrics three times.
Using Movement to Understand A-A-B-A Form

• Ask students to sing the A section of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” and create a movement for that section. Do the same with the B section, eliciting a contrasting movement.
• Split the class into two groups and have the first group sing the A section while the second group moves, and have the second group sing the B section while the first group moves, switching parts for each chorus.
• Play Track 26 “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (play-along).
  • Let’s try it out with the music. Sing along and perform your corresponding A and B movements.

Musicians Play with A-A-B-A Form

• Play Track 22 “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (Armstrong complete), as performed by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. For more information about Armstrong and Ellington, see page 70.
  • Follow the melody on SG10 while you listen to how the musicians play with the A-A-B-A form in this version of “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” featuring Armstrong on vocals. (You will hear an introduction before the A-A-B-A pattern, or chorus, begins.)
  • How is the melody different from what you see on the page?
  • Does knowing the form of the piece change how you listen to the music?

Duke Ellington’s “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”

“It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” was one of the first compositions to include the word “swing” in its title. Duke Ellington composed the piece during an intermission at a big band dance performance in Chicago. Legend has it that no one was dancing until he enlivened the mood by introducing this song. Track 22 features Ellington’s big band along with famous trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong.

Creative Extension: My Musical Form

• Choose a time signature and work with the class to create two contrasting rhythmic patterns, labeled A and B, in My Musical Form on page 40.
• Have the students practice clapping the rhythms while keeping a steady beat with their feet.
• Divide the class into two groups and assign each group one of the rhythms.
• Write patterns on the board or in My Musical Form on page 40 (e.g. A-A-B-A, A-B-A, etc.), and have the students perform the patterns, playing their section of the rhythm.

Go Deeper

Explore A-A-B-A form in Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm.”
“It Don’t Mean a Thing
(If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”

Melodic and Lyric Patterns

Phrases:

Phrase A:
- Melodic:
  - It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing
  - Doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah... doo wah doo wah doo wah

Phrase A:
- Melodic:
  - It don’t mean a thing all you got to do is sing
  - Doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah... doo wah doo wah doo wah

Phrase B:
- Melodic:
  - It makes no diff’ rence if it’s sweet or hot
  - Just give that rhythm ev’ry thing you got

Phrase A:
- Melodic:
  - It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing
  - Doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah doo wah... doo wah doo wah doo wah
My Musical Form

Create two contrasting rhythmic patterns.

List several different combinations of the A and B patterns below (e.g. A-A-B-A, A-B-A, etc.):

_________________________  _______________________

_________________________  _______________________

_________________________  _______________________

Now, perform your arrangement!